

Iran-Contra figure hid man wanted in plane bombing

By BRIAN BARGER
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Washington — A key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal with close ties to Vice President George Bush has acknowledged harboring a fugitive charged in the 1976 bombing of a Cuban passenger plane in which 73 people died.

Felix Rodriguez, whose contacts with George Bush initially drew the vice president into the Iran-Contra affair, said in a series of recent interviews that he harbored the bombing suspect, Luis Posada Carriles, shortly after his August 1985 escape from a Venezuelan prison.

Offering the first details of his involvement with Posada, Rodriguez said he agreed to hide the fugitive at the request of a wealthy Miami benefactor who he said financed Posada's prison escape. He would not identify the financier.

Senate investigators are pursuing allegations that Posada's prison escape was financed in part by Jorge Mas, with possible help from then-White House aide Oliver North. Mas, who heads the Cuban-American National Foundation, an anti-Castro lobby group, denied any role in the escape.

Rodriguez, a former CIA operative, offered refuge to Posada while managing a secret White House operation based in El Salvador to ferry weapons to the Nicaraguan rebels. The weapons airlift was directed by North during a U.S. ban on rebel military aid.

Despite Bush's friendship with Rodriguez, White House officials acknowledged that Bush took no action after numerous media reports in late 1986 identified Posada as a logistics aide

for Rodriguez in the weapons airlift.

Bush was CIA director in 1976 when the bombing occurred, and took a personal interest in this and a string of related anti-Castro bombings that shook the hemisphere that year, according to law enforcement officials.

Donald Gregg, Bush's national security adviser, said, "I don't think the vice president knew that Posada was working with Felix (Rodriguez), so why would he call for an investigation?"

When Posada's role came to light in late 1986, Gregg said Bush "didn't pay much attention" to the press reports and made no inquiries after reporters questioned him about the fugitive's links to Rodriguez.

"If he (Bush) had asked about it, he would have asked me," said Gregg, who was Rodriguez's CIA supervisor during the Vietnam War. "I don't know about when the allegations on Posada came out, and I did not focus on it."

Bush declined to answer a series of written questions about the affair submitted to his press office last week.

Rodriguez's disclosures could raise a potentially embarrassing issue for Bush during his presidential campaign. As head of the president's Task Force on Combatting Terrorism, Bush has trumpeted a tough stand on pursuing and punishing international terrorists.

Rodriguez, a strong supporter of the vice president, said he was never asked about the fugitive by Bush or his aides. "If they had asked, I would have told them," Rodriguez said, "but nobody asked."

With assistance from Gregg,
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Rodriguez was placed in El Salvador as a counterinsurgency adviser to the Salvadoran military in 1984. Less than a year later, North recruited him to manage the secret Contra airlift that was financed in part with profits diverted from secret arms sales to Iran.

But Rodriguez said he never told Bush or his aides about hiring the terrorist suspect in the sensitive covert operation, and did not advise Bush aides of his work for North until shortly before the Iran-Contra scandal broke.

Posada's link to the operation first came to light after a cargo plane carrying American Eugene Hasenfus was downed Oct. 5, 1986, in Nicaragua. Hasenfus

identified a photograph of Posada as Rodriguez's aide, who used the pseudonym Ramon Medina.

As the scandal unfolded, attention turned to Bush's office, where an aide fielded the first call from Rodriguez to advise that one of North's planes was shot down.

Bush aides acknowledge that Rodriguez was in regular contact with the vice president's office, and met with Bush on three occasions while managing North's airlift operation. But Bush and his aides maintain they were kept in the dark about North's Contra resupply efforts during the 1984-1986 congressional ban on U.S. aid.

Posada, a former CIA demolitions expert, was imprisoned for nine years during a lengthy and complicated trial process stemming from charges of planning the Oct. 6, 1976, bombing of a Cuban passenger plane in which 73 people, including the Cuban

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national fencing team, were killed.

On August 18, 1985, Posada escaped from Venezuela's San Juan de Los Morros prison, and fled to El Salvador. Rodriguez denied any direct involvement in Posada's prison escape, but said he helped arrange Posada's arrival at El Salvador's Ilopango air force base, where he gave him a job.

"I got a call from an old friend in Miami who has helped me financially, who wanted me to hide him," Rodriguez said. "I felt I had no choice. The man who called was a very old and dear friend, and he has helped pay my expenses since I have been in Central America. I felt I could not turn him down."

Rodriguez refused to identify the caller, but when pressed he acknowledged it was the same person who financed Posada's prison escape.